

The Case and The Girl

By Randall Parrish

But if Natalie Coolidge was also prisoner on board, what of her? Wasn't that the very thing most probable? Of course it was; how foolish he had been. These men, recklessly criminal, as they were, would never sacrifice the yacht, and risk their own lives, merely to put him out of the way. He was not important enough for that; he was but an incident. While this was—must be—a carefully arranged plan. The girl then must be the real victim—his own plight arose merely because he chanced to be there, and the villains dare not leave him alive to tell the story.

The certainty of this acted like an electric shock. He must find the girl, and serve her. Surely she must welcome his coming to her assistance now. She would be alone, free to reveal the truth of all this strange mix-up of affairs; perhaps the old trust, the old confidence between them would be renewed. The hope instantly inspired action. His eager eyes searched the narrow confines of the stateroom for some possible weapon with which to assail the door. The stout stool alone seemed available. Swinging this over his shoulder, hampered by the narrowness of space, he struck again and again, with all his strength, until suddenly the lock gave, and the door burst open.

He stepped cautiously forward, with hands outstretched, and his groping fingers came in sudden contact with the cabin wall, which he followed, circling to the left. In this manner he succeeded in finally locating the door opening out on to the deck, and weaved his way across to the right-hand stateroom door. It was locked, the key gone. He must break a way in; but first he must explain to her, so as to spare her the sudden fright of such an assault. He rapped sharply on the panel.

"Miss Coolidge: you are there, are you not?"

"Yes; who is that?" almost a cry of delight in the voice. "You—you have a voice I know."

"I am Matthew West; but do not ask questions now. The yacht is going down, and I must break this door in to release you. Stand back while I smash the boards. You hear and understand?"

"Yes—yes; I am safely away; have no fear."

A lantern's flickering light revealed the weapon he required—a heavy hatchet, and he snatched it up, and began to splinter the wood with well-directed blows. He worked madly, feverishly, swinging the sharp blade with all his strength and skill, gouging out great splinters of wood, and finally forcing the lock to yield. He sprang eagerly through the opening, the hatchet still in his grasp, and faced her.

An instant both paused, and then she cried out in sudden relief. "Oh, it is really you, Captain West. I know now. What has happened? How did you come to be here?"

"Not now," he insisted. "Don't ask me now. Just come as quick as you can. There is no time for anything but action. Quick; let me take your hand."

She permitted him to draw her through the door on to the black, deserted deck. West, bracing himself to the sudden plunging, managed to reach the rail. He drew back, sick at heart at the sight of the waves lap-

ping the side almost on a level with the sloping deck on which he stood. The sight brought him home as never before, the drear deadly peril in which they were. He would find some means of rescue; he must! He was back instantly, grasping her arm.

"Quick," he cried. "You know this yacht; what small boats did she carry?"

"Only the one; the other was so warped it had been taken ashore."

"Was there no life-raft? There must surely be something of that kind."

"Yes, there is; I remember now. It is forward there, near the engine-room hatch."

The deck was already sloping to port in a dangerous degree, and West was compelled to cling to the rail, as they slowly made passage forward through the darkness. He located the life-raft at last, securely fastened to the side of the deck-house, and, leaving the girl to hold herself upright as best she could, began to hack it loose. Working with feverish impatience, he realized suddenly that his companion had deserted the place where he had left her and was also tugging and slashing at the lashings of the raft. These finally yielded to their blind attack. Without the exchange of a word the two grasped the sides and shoved the thing hard down against the port rail.

"Wait now," he cried exultantly. "Stay behind, and brace yourself against the hatch-cover. I'll get underneath and lift. Once on the rail the two of us must shove it free overboard."

She understood instantly, and, with a single swift glance at her dimly revealed figure, West straightened up, bearing the full weight on his shoulders, every muscle strained to the utmost, as he thus pressed it over her by inch across the wooden barrier. Suddenly the great unwieldy mass slid forward, poised itself an instant on the rounded rail. The yacht rolled sharply to port, flinging both on to the deck together, but sending the raft crunching overboard, clear of the side. West grasped Natalie, and dragged her to her feet, but, even as he held her in his arms, ready to leap out into the black water, the shuddering vessel, with a last despairing effort, partially righted herself, and staggered on.

"Can you jump to the raft from the rail?" he asked. "It is either that, or the water. Are you afraid to try?"

"Afraid—no. Hold me; yes; that way, but—but what are you going to do?"

"Follow, of course; but I shall take to the water. There are no oars here. Nothing to use as a substitute for them, I'll have to swim, and push that old ark as far away as possible. Are you ready?"

She poised herself, held steady by the grip of his hands, her eyes on the dark outline of the floating raft. There was no hesitancy, no questioning.

"Say when," he said sharply.

"Now."

She sprang forward, and came down, sinking to her knees, and clinging fast, as the raft bobbed up and down under her sudden weight, dipping until the water rolled completely over it.

CHAPTER XIV

The Coming of Dawn.

West leaned far out, and could perceive little except a bare, shapeless outline.

"Did you make it? Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm safe enough. But—but Captain West, I want you to come."

"I'm coming. Watch out now—good! Here goes."

He made the plunge, coming up to the surface close beside the raft, the edge of which he quickly grasped with his hands. He swam steadily, urging the unwieldy raft away from the menacing side of the vessel, driven by the necessity of escaping the inevitable suction when she went down. Gradually the distance widened, until there extended a considerable waste of water between the two. Satisfied



She Went Down Bow First.

that they were far enough away for safety, he clambered cautiously upon the platform, the girl as carefully making room for him on the few dry planks.

There was nothing to say, nothing to do; for the moment at least they were safe, and perhaps morning would bring rescue. Suddenly West straightened up, aroused by a new interest—surely that last wave went entirely over the yacht's rail; he could see the

white gleam of spray as it broke; and yes, there was another! Then, almost without warning, the end came. She went down bow first, the stern lifting until West could discern the dark outlines of the screw, and then dropped like a stone, vanishing almost instantly.

"That is the last of the Seminoles," West said, feeling the necessity of strengthening her. "But it is nothing to frighten you. We are safe enough here. But you must keep your nerve; we may be adrift for hours yet before we are picked up."

"You are sure we will be?"

"The probability is altogether in our favor," he insisted, as much to encourage himself as her. "This is Lake Michigan in summer time, and boats are plying everywhere. We shall surely be sighted by something when daylight returns."

She was silent a moment, with head again bent forward.

"What do you suppose became of the men who deserted the yacht?" she asked, her voice natural and quiet.

"Ashore, perhaps, by this time. They were certain they had done a good job, and eager to get away safely. Hogan never deemed it possible for us to get away alive. As it was, the escape was almost a miracle."

"A miracle!" softly. "Perhaps so, yet I know who accomplished it. I owe my life to you, Captain West."

She paused doubtfully, and then went on impulsively. "Won't you explain to me now what it all means? How you came to be here? and—why those men sought in this way to kill me?"

"You do not know?"

"Only in the vaguest way; is it my fortune? I have been held prisoner; lied to, and yet nothing has been made clear."

"It is a devilish conspiracy that has been plotted for a long while. There must be a dozen involved in it, one way or another, but, as near as I can learn, the chief devil, the brains of the gang, is the fellow named Hobart. Have you known him—long?"

"No," she said doubtfully, "not unless his other name was Jim. There was a fellow they called Jim. He was my jailor after that woman locked me into a room."

"Where was this?"

"Why surely you must know. In that cottage where we stopped with Percival Coolidge."

He drew a deep breath, more thoroughly puzzled than ever. What could be her purpose to make so bold an effort to deceive? His heart sank, but he determined to go on, and learn how far she would carry this strange tale. Perhaps out of the welter he could discern some truth.

"The fellow's name is Jim, all right, Jim Hobart. The woman passes as his wife. You knew nothing of all this?"

"No; I only saw the man twice; he was very rough then, and swore when I questioned him."

"And the woman?"

"She would not talk, either; only once she told me that Percival Coolidge had committed suicide. That made me wonder, for I believed he had something to do with my being held there. What did he say when he returned to the auto without me? What explanation did he make for my absence?"

"Explanation! He needed none; you came out of the cottage with him."

"What do you mean?"

"But I saw you with my own eyes, talked with you, and all three of us drove back to Fairlawn together. My G—d, Miss Natalie, have you lost your mind? Do you even deny dismissing me from your service?"

She gazed at him through the gloom, utterly unable to comprehend.

"I must have, if what you say is true," she admitted. "For I certainly have no such recollection."

He stared off into the black night, his lips pressed closely together. Could this be false? Could she sit there calmly, in the midst of such peril as surrounded them, and still deliberately endeavor to deceive?

"And you knew nothing of the death of Percival Coolidge, except what was told you by that woman?"

"She brought me a newspaper which I read; that was all I knew."

"And in that house on Wray street where I met you again last night. And you talked with me; tried to get me to quit following you. You surely haven't forgotten that already?"

She dropped her face wearily into her hands, and her voice sounded listless.

"I—I almost believe you are the crazy one, Captain West. I swear I have never knowingly met, or spoken to you since we drove to that cottage on Sunday. I cannot believe what you say."

"Yet it is true, every word true!" he asserted stoutly. "Why else should I be here? You returned with us to Fairlawn, and we chatted together pleasantly all the way. Later you seemed to change, and discharged me rather rudely. Then Percival Coolidge was killed—shot down by an assassin. You were at the inquest, and testified. The next day you discharged Sexton, and later he learned, and reported to me, that some one called you on the phone from Wray street, and wanted you to come over there at once. I found you there, and this fellow Hobart with you."

"But, Captain West, I never saw you; I never left the room in the third story where I was locked in, except when they took me away in a machine to the yacht."

"You dropped a note in the alley, enclosed in a silver knife?"

"Yes, I did. Did you find it?"

"Sexton did, and that was what brought me here."

"But it is all so strange," she exclaimed despairingly. "How could I have done all these things, been in all these places, and yet not remembering about it? Could I have been drugged or influenced in some way by those people?"

"I do not believe you were either hypnotized or drugged. Good G—d; why did I not think of this solution before? I must have been blind; that was not you; I can recall a hundred little things now to convince me."

"What is it you mean?"

"Another woman played your part; a woman most wonderfully like you, even to the voice. There is no other solution of the problem. And that reveals the plan of robbery—to get you out of the way, and then have her take the fortune."

She sat silent, motionless, apparently unable at once to grasp all the meaning in his words. Then she pointed away into the distance.

"See, there is light over there," she exclaimed eagerly. "That must be the east, and it is morning."

He lifted his head, and looked where she pointed. A dull, gray light topped the waters, and the sky above held a faint tinge of crimson. The wan glow accentuated the loneliness, and for the moment left him depressed. Nothing appeared within range of vision to break the drear monotony of gray sea and sky. Neither felt any desire to speak; they could only stare out silently across the desolation of waters, feeling their helplessness and peril.

Her head sank forward into her hands, as though she would thus shut out the whole weird picture, and West, aroused by the slight movement, glanced quickly aside. His hand

sought her own, where it gripped for support, and closed over it warmly.

"It cannot be as bad as it seems," he insisted, trying to say the words cheerfully. "I know these waters, and they are never long deserted. Luck will change, surely; perhaps within the hour we shall be picked up, and can laugh at all this experience."

She lifted her head, and their eyes met frankly.

"I am not afraid," she protested. "Not physically, at least. Truly I have not felt fear since you joined me, Captain West."

"But you are very tired?"

"Perhaps so, yet I have not thought about that. There are other things; you do not believe in me."

"Why say that?" he asked in astonishment. "There is no question of the kind between us now."

"Truly, is there not? What was it you believed of me—that—that I was part of this conspiracy?"

"I do not know what I believed, if I actually believed anything, Miss Natalie," he explained rather lamely. "I cannot make the situation altogether clear even to myself. Under the circumstances, you cannot condemn me justly."

"Condemn! I do not. How could I? You must have kept faith in me, nevertheless, or you would never be here now. That is what seems marvelous to me—that you actually cared enough to believe."

"I realize now that I have," he said gravely. "Through it all I have kept a very large measure of faith in you."

"Why should that faith have survived?" she questioned persistently, as though doubt would not wholly leave her mind. "Surely there was never a madder story told than the one I told you, and I couldn't have proven an item of it."

"Yet it has shown itself true," he interrupted.

"You actually believe, then, that there is another woman—a counterfeit of myself?"

"It is the only theory feasible; you have convinced me of that. Will you believe what I say?"

"Implicitly."

"Perhaps it sounds like a fairy tale," he spoke frankly, his eyes seeking her own, all their surroundings forgotten in the eagerness of the moment, "but I will tell you the exact truth. Before this misunderstanding occurred you had confided in me, trusted me, although I was a stranger and I believed absolutely in your story. I had that basis to rest on. Then I got hold of various odds and ends of evidence which convinced me that something was wrong—that you were actually being conspired against. I even gained a suspicion that Percival Coolidge was the actual leader of the conspiracy. You could never have been made prisoner in that cottage without his connivance; he must have lured you there for that particular purpose, so that

his other girl could take your place without danger of discovery. The reason for Percival's participation is only a guess, but my theory is the fellow had so juggled your fortune, and the time for final accounting was so near, he had to take a desperate chance in order to save himself."

"My own theory is that when Hobart learned what Percival Coolidge proposed doing, his own criminal tendencies told him that here was some easy money. The girl was undoubtedly wholly under his control; some denizen of the underworld probably. She had already played her part sufficiently well to convince Hobart of success. Why then, shouldn't he have this money instead of Percival? There was no reason except that Percival was in the way. That was why he was killed."

"And," she questioned breathlessly, "the man meant to murder me also?"

"Not at that time, in my judgment," West answered thoughtfully. "Such an additional crime was not a part of the original plan. Once the money, and other property, were delivered to the fake Natalie, the cashing in and get away would be easy; even the identity of the thieves would be concealed."

"But they did try to kill me."

"Yes, later, by the sinking of the yacht. Probably I am largely responsible for that. My appearance in Wray street must have been quite a shock, and when I succeeded in escaping from their trap there, Hobart very evidently lost his head completely. The knowledge that I was free, perhaps in communication with the police, led to your night trip to the Seminoles, and the secret sinking of the yacht. He had gone too far by then to hesitate at another murder."

"I—I think I understand now," she admitted, "how all this occurred; but why—why were you so persistent? There—there must have been a reason more impelling than a vague suspicion?"

"There was—the most compelling impulse in the world."

"You mean faith in me?"

"Even more than that; love for you, Natalie. I love you, have loved you all the time, without fully realizing exactly what it meant. There have been times when I have doubted you, when I could not wholly escape the evidence that you were also concerned personally in this fraud. I have endeavored to withdraw from the case, to forget, and blot everything from memory. But something stronger than will prevented; I could not desert you; could not believe you were wilfully wrong. You understand what I mean."

"Yes," the words barely reaching him. "It was the other girl; she undermined your faith."

"That is the truth; yet how could it be, do you suppose? My very love should have enabled me to detect the difference."

She touched his arm with her hand, and under the slight pressure he looked aside at her.

"You know now," she said softly. "And I know. All this is past and gone between us. We are here alone, the sport of the waves, and I have no reason to be other than frank. I believe in you, Matthew West; in your honesty and manhood. You say you love me?"

"With all my heart and soul; it seems to me now I have always loved you—you came to me, the lady of my dreams."

Her eyes were wet with unshed tears, yet she smiled back into his face, her voice trembling as she answered:

"And I," she said slowly, "have had no thought but of you since our morning in the garden together. How far away that seems."

"You mean you love me?"

"Yes; I love you; there is no word stronger, but I would speak it—is that not enough?"

He held her in his arms, in spite of the trembling raft, tossed by the swell of the sea, and crushed her against him in the ardent strain of passion. An instant she held her head back, her eyes gazing straight into his; then, with sigh of content, yielded, and their lips met, and clung.

Continued in the Farmer

XMAS TREE AND PROGRAM IN LAYTON

The following Christmas program will be given by the Layton ward Sunday school and primary at the Layton Hall, Friday evening, December 29th.

The program will begin at 7:30 o'clock and will be as follows:

Story of the Birth of the Savior Thelma Goodman.

Tableaux, "Holy Family"

Reading Eliza Hicks

Tableaux, "Mary and Babe"

"Jolly Old St. Nick" Baby Class.

Piano Duet Misses Clifford

Reading Lourine Packer.

Vocal Duet

Helen Payne and Urida Hatch

Piano Duet

Ula Van Gausig and Zona Scarlett

Reading Bernice Birdno

Violin solo Clarence Crandall.

Scottish dance, en costume



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Children will be admitted free but grown people will be charged an admission of 10 cents.

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